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Paper, Scissors, Stone

**by
Robin Todd**

**A Creative Writing Project Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
through the Department of English in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at the University of Windsor**

**Windsor, Ontario, Canada
1996**



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Paper, Scissors, Stone

*Stone breaks scissors (Stone wins)
Scissors cut paper (Scissors win)
Paper covers stone (Paper wins)*

-Best Games

*“if I think hard enough it will appear
I’ve drawn something out
of the air, my mind pulling
invisible particles
together, forming a mass,
making.”*

*-Alden Nowlan
Selected Poems*

This collection is dedicated to Gram Goudie, who found beauty in that first startling baby picture and in those early poems, and to my parents, who taught me to seek the truth in the smallest gesture.

I

Paper

"Surfacing from a faded language, the word comes when needed"

**-Moya Cannon
*Oar***

Connections

for W.C.

late in the evening
atop a swell of Billy Holiday
I asked how you begin

in words so clear
I can hear them now
you told of seeing whole poems
in a single metaphor

I imagined them emerging
from small, perfect seeds
marveling to think
of your gifts as a gardener

II

that night you appeared
surreal in my dream
off in the distance
doing tricks on a skateboard

how familiar were your movements
reminding me of my own
years ago

yet you were doing stunts
I could not master--
spinning with feet firmly planted,
flipping the board beneath you
as you flew from the curb

III

what follows is more puzzling
than your performance in my dream
yet I offer it as truth
just the same

cycling today
along the length of the river
I found myself thinking
in pure metaphors

suddenly I saw
the connections of which you spoke--
in billowing sails
I saw the mind unfurling,
in the lushness of lilacs
summer's sure arrival

IV

as I struggle now
to place these words
on the page
one final metaphor
comes slowly into focus--

this poem is a gift
of words freshly gathered
offered to you
the gardener
who planted those first seeds

What I Do

wouldn't part waters
 split an atom
 split an apple

wouldn't alter the turning of the tides
 shift the currents of the wind
 adjust the temperature even one degree

wouldn't save someone from dying
 mend a broken limb
 cure a common cold

wouldn't make me a millionaire
 not even a thousandaire
 (an amount so small the word has slipped out of sight)

would not even buy
 beer or flowers
 as Al Purdy learned *At the Quinte Hotel*

yet I rise each day and begin again
 as if my life depended
 on writing a poem

Refuge

the desire to construct
out of the vagueness
of despair

a shape
as clear
as a poem

is what prompts me
to place these words
on the page
just so

as if a poem
might serve as refuge--
a sunlit room to linger in
when darkness comes calling

Words Which Conjure

for Michael Ondaatje

*She is a woman I don't know well enough
to hold in my wing, if writers have wings,
to harbour for the rest of my life*

I pause to tell my students of my longing
to shape words which conjure

a pilot who falls burning from the sky
the Bedouin whose hands gently heal

the shifting sands of the boundless Sahara
a villa in ruins among the hills of Florence

they smile in pity, suggesting they're only words
and for one tired moment I contemplate defeat

yet still I hold out my final offering--
poems laced with the faint scent of cinnamon

the students bend slowly toward the words
like flowers stretching to meet the sun

toward the young boy remembering
the first girl who *put a warm hand into his trousers*

toward the poet mourning the loss of b.p. Nichol
with the final words, *I tie you to me*

I will not ruin this by asking too much
by suggesting we too are bound

after class one student waits
until the room has emptied and finally it is safe

to speak the word
awesome

Threads

by chance I meet a friend
recovering from cancer--
she takes me around her garden
explaining how fast it has grown
like her own hair
which last time we met
was tucked beneath a stylish wig

she shows me a catalogue
of Chicago's *Dinner Party*--
explaining the intricacies
of this work of art,
how it celebrates the power
of the female artist

we revel in the list
of 999 women
whose contributions went unnoticed
by a world covering its face
with huge, trembling hands

as English teachers
we turn our talk
to what is taught
and not taught--
she tells of a former student
who recalled studying exactly one female writer
correlating nicely with her memory
of precisely one female hero

later in the day
while visiting another friend
I am surprised by her eight year-old daughter
who wishes to know
why heroes are always men--
she laughs as I tell her
of the many female heroes
kept hidden by those who fear them

how silly, she says,
to be frightened by a hero
leaving me at a loss
to explain such fear
or how St. Joan
(the only female hero she knows)
witnessed the awful flames
of people's terror

late that night
as I read your poem
Women Fly
my thoughts gather round your words
like chimney swifts
flocking to the stack at dusk

I draw together the threads of my day
slowly creating a tapestry of women--

gardeners
artists
warriors
winged creatures--

rich and weighty with gold brocade,
it celebrates those heroes
so carefully tucked away

Shape of a Poem

a flapper--
narrow and willowy
waist dropped low,
a slip of a thing
with a sleek
little bob--

this you say
is the shape
of my poetry

earning you a scowl
as I leaf through my poems
finding neat little columns
and vast white space

as I see
how I've fallen
in love with a shape
how I've come
to believe
in its figure alone

convinced as I was,
I missed the jarring
stops and starts
reading like someone
just learning
to drive

but like a horse set loose in wide-open pastures
you have freed me to explore the page's frontiers

to
gallop
along
its
narrow
margins

to pause in the shadows of its dusky forests

with words unfettered, flung clear across the page
I return the power to the short line once more
distinct upon the page

finally I too can write long sprawling matron lines
I can stretch the poem wide beyond the cherished familiar
and the eye which once shut as if against a foreign object
gazes now in wonder at such ample creations--
full skirts and pleats fanning out across the page

Cyclist as Poem

this evening on my bike
I felt like a poem--
racing headlong down steep dirt roads
I was pure
 space
as world blurred

and like green-sprouting fields
I pedalled by
I too was a metaphor for renewal
even as I hammered
against gusting winds

crossing a bridge reduced
to its barren frame
there was a certain poetry
even then
as I balanced bike on shoulder

stepping carefully
across rusty beams
as steel flakes fell
 soundless
into the water below

and as I rode home
chilled and trembling,
the poetic lay still
in the final strands of light
drawn faint across the sky

Poolside

I gaze at the glistening water
while the clouds wait patiently
in the corners of the sky
granting me this small respite
of sun-drenched silence
as the clammer within
(what words to choose,
how to say what matters)
gradually subsides

I tremble somewhat
fearing the stillness will not last
that just as the wind begins to rise
so too will the chatter
(possible titles for the collection
splashing about in my head)

as my thoughts begin to race
far beyond the moment
I yearn for those summers
of drowsy afternoons
reading long, sprawling novels
I did not have to name

All You

for Donna

I try to write a poem
that is all you--
the you whose voice
quiets my fears,
whose laughter holds me
steady in its embrace

but in speaking of you, friend,
I must include me too
for though I know you exist
in a world all your own--
with countries and continents
unknowable to me--
it's as you move through my world
that you seem most real,
crossing my oceans
leaving footprints on every shore

so forgive my intrusion
into this--your own poem--
and know that I'm guided
by the stars of your own constellation

Sitting Still

You said no poems, don't write any poems, as if putting it into words made it far too real. No poems, then, at least not for you, though already the words are clammering inside me, words from last night left behind. You said, this is the last time, we can't meet like this again, and just like that you punched a hole clear through me. Don't sit around obsessing, you advised as you left, so I'm not (sitting still), I'm driving instead--flying at 140--but I still can't seem to lose you. For God's sake no poems, you repeated, sighing, as if my words were leaden weights you were made to carry. I was ready with my retort though--yeah, you'd be *lucky* to get a poem, I said, even as the pain shot through every limb. You told me you were worried about my feeling too much, and I hate this, hate that you're worried about my heart, hate that you're worried about me writing a God damn poem. But what I hate most is me sitting here, trying so hard to hold this poem inside me. This poem which is spilling out all over the page. This poem which is bigger than the space we took up last night, bigger than the space we'll ever be allowed to fill. And maybe this isn't a poem at all (this creation which has shaped itself around me); maybe it's just a space I'm sitting in--big enough to hold my own heart beating.

Catch

the words passed between us are frail offerings--
delicate wildflowers plucked from Alpine meadows

you hold these words as if they carried within them
fire enough to warm the world

as if they were precious gems
brought forth from the deepest mines of Africa

your words of affection arrive in a whisper
barely a murmuring against my ear

I place them carefully in a red satin pouch
tying it gently around my neck

for tomorrow you will rise all bluster and distance
your words flung fast from across the room

and I will crouch with catcher's mitt extended before me
dreaming of those other words pressed close against my chest

After We Have Argued

I wanted to write a poem for you
with words smooth and round as stones
lying at the water's edge

words to hold in your hands
feeling their warmth
from the afternoon sun

but those words lie beyond my reach
while within lie words so cold
they'd burn your fingertips

at the slightest touch
so sharp
they'd slice through your skin

with barely a whisper
leaving the faintest scar
to mark the occasion

A Photograph Called You

here is a picture of us
with bright smiling faces
arms wrapped round each other
in a way that speaks of loving

but what of the tempers
flaring moments before,
the doubt that lingers
even in your arms?

this text remains hidden
behind careful expressions,
and I wonder
of your own text

concealed from my view--
your silence
full of sorrow
you will not say

I can read nothing
in this photograph I hold here
where the play of light and shadow
allows you to slip away

so I return
to the text you have presented
writing beneath the picture
your name next to mine

A Poem You'll Never See

this a poem
written far from your eyes--
and how strange it is
to write love
poems in isolation
to shield them from the beloved
as if love were a private act
as if a space exists
which love simply cannot fill

we are together, you say,
but I begin to drift
towards a place
you do not know
to confront demons
you cannot name

I will go with you,
you tell me softly,
and I smile at you
and your bright belief
though I know now
of a distance
too great for love
to travel

II

Scissors

"In us grows the strange and the wild barely covered by skin"

-Susan Musgrave
Forcing the Narcissus

How Is It

that you can close up
tighter than a boxer's fist

can travel so far into yourself
the gentlest touch won't draw you back

how is it that you can become
more awkward than a perfect stranger

can leave me scrambling
for two words to put together

yet all the while you're sitting
no farther than an arm's length away

Wild Places

distance makes the heart grow crazy--
nights filled with dreams
from which I awaken
with a faint impression
of you leaning on me

imagine you speaking
in soft woeful tones
with big pleading eyes
and gosh-darn hands

imagine me deceived--
waking with you
feeling warmer
than afternoon sun,
sweeter than berries
in the evening rain

then you call
from so far away
and the distance in your voice
is farther than you'll ever travel,
the coldness greater
than the winter will ever be

in that moment
you tumble earthward
like Icarus descending,
leaving me wishing
I'd never woken
from my own wild places

Lament

the problem is
you get too close
or, rather, I give too much away
and then I want it back

I give you a piece of me
then my skin begins to crawl
as I watch you, the archeologist,
turning a fragment of bone
over and over
in your hands

I want to scream
to turn and run
I want it back
and I want you
to know nothing

in anger I retreat
to a place where I cannot hear you
and though your face crumples
as I make my escape
I can offer no consolation
for I am lost to you
until the fury dissolves
in the spaces that surround me

later you approach cautiously
asking, is that really you
has the dark storm finally passed?
yes, I'm back, I say
knowing I cannot tell you
how different this time will be

Dissolve

while westward bound
on the 401
there is a moment

when self dissolves
into the flatness
of the land

when I am
more and less
than I

until stopping
merely
to fill up the tank

and the particles
of self
gather once more

like grains of iron
pulled fast
toward the magnet

Eclipse

"Nobody can keep himself from himself that completely"
-Gail Godwin

there were moments
when I dreamt
of eluding the self

of slipping
like a thief
through a window eased open

of disappearing
into otherness
with barely a ripple

not content with dreaming
I took steps
towards escape

journeying alone
to the other side
of the globe

believing
that disguised as a traveller
I might vanish from sight

for a time
I saw the world
with eyes clear and bright

looking neither forward
nor back
I was observer only

then suddenly
all my old fears
arrived

like part
of my luggage
lost along the way

its sides scuffed
and worn
baggage tickets gone

then, like the eye
which has stared
at the eclipse

I saw
in everything
the faint outline of self

Bound

details smaller
than the lines
of my hand,
worries too slight
to ever be spoken

will I wear make-up
or buy a new skirt?
should I tuck in my shirt
grow my hair long?

tethered fast
to thoughts so idle
I watch my world
shrink slowly
out of sight

Transition

draw close
and I will tell you
how each day
starts like the last
seemingly familiar
with a mug of coffee
weighty in my hands,
writing in the stillness
of uncluttered morning

how I move
into the world
and the rupture begins--
the patterns disappear
and all seems strange
as the earth slips
out from under me
leaving me suspended

my grasp tightens
round the details
of my day
but like words repeated
again and again
they are emptied of meaning
and offer no respite

I have ventured
into Dali's landscape
and can find no footing
as the ground tilts
beneath me
and time folds
over on itself

then comes the sadness
I cannot name
and how to explain
that while laughing
with friends
I want only to weep

how to tell you
of the terror
fluttering inside
as I imagine
this world
without end

Anchored

that first memorable summer in Lake Louise,
when staff accommodation consisted of a tin-can trailer,
it was my brightly patched quilt that defined my space
dividing it from the rooms with beer bottles for ashtrays
graffiti splashed artlessly on the walls

traveling in New Zealand
my tent became my place of retreat
so when the centre pole shattered
and the tent collapsed inward
I propped it up with branches from an old apple tree
yet still the tent rested so close above me
each morning I woke with dew
lying faint upon my brow

months later in Australia
I walked by houses with well-kept gardens
aching for the familiar--
the warm air of spring through windows just opened
pancakes and CBC each Sunday morning--
having carried around a pack with my life stuffed in it
I wanted only to set it down
to empty it forever

sitting here in my sister's house
all these years later
I am struck by the fact that I am still in motion
housesitting and visiting my way through the summer--
once more my life is packed up tightly
and my watch on the nightstand
now defines each makeshift home

Time to Come In

you ask what it is like
returning to work after a year away--

think back to when you were little, I say,
out playing ball after dinner

the air is warm and light
the sky is turning a soft orange-red

you are in the far end of the yard
happily catching fly balls and chasing down grounders

a moment later your mother calls out
telling you it's time to come in

you want to argue that everyone else gets to stay out longer
but you know such protests to be in vain

with glove dangling at your side
you trudge slowly toward the door--

at this you smile
remembering the moment perfectly

If Change

meant only
spinning a cocoon
round oneself
emerging after
as other

if it required
simply
a long sleep
dreaming in darkness
of wings unfurling

if it did
not involve
the shedding of skin
in which self
is wrapped
so surely

nor demand
the sacrifice
of the familiar--
long slow journeys
on rutted trails
of bark,
early morning wanderings
through dew-laden
grasses

if it meant
only flight
without the terror
of falling
then
I would speak
with ease
of transformation

Longing

finally I understand Rossetti's wish
to balance
between this world and the next
her contemplation of
Sleep that no pain shall wake
Night that no morn shall break

I understand too
Webb's desire
to sit perfectly
still
and only
remotely human

I try to envision
moving outside myself--
I'd peel off my old skin
leaving it shriveled and fading
while warming my new self
in the bright morning light

I'd make a grand escape--
slipping through ties that bind
leaving only ropes
whose knots hold nothing

a patient near death,
I'd float above myself
watching with vague interest
the figure lying
below--

though I imagine these metaphors
in the greatest detail
still they collapse beneath the weight
of fears and petty concerns

more than ever, I understand
the painful longing
to be less than nothing
in this sorrowful world

Reflection

how impressive I was in my understanding
of the struggles young women face;
how eloquently I spoke of their disordered worlds--
these girls so thin they barely cast a shadow
yet who witness in the mirror their own bodies swelling

level-headed as I was
how I worried for these girls
who cared too much for the opinions of others
shaping themselves towards some vision of perfection;
how I hid behind carefully chosen words
while slowly I split in two--
heart and head dividing nicely
so that I might carry on speech-making
while turning my own body into a battlefield

and when asked
what do you feel
I could not answer but to say
I think
could not remember what it was like to feel at all
without stuffing food down as fast as I might
to muffle the ache I could not bear

how long it has taken
to mend heart and head
pulling them back together stitch by stitch
and how I struggle even now
to harmonize their voices
saying yes

III

Stone

*"Try to find me mud and stones now mother
give me somewhere to start"*

-Moya Cannon
Oar

Pilgrimage to the Niagara Falls Museum

for Susan

prepared for the noise and glitter of the strip
I would have viewed the museum in the same light
would have dismissed its musty contents
as random and meaningless
if not for you

who guide me through
placing in my hands
small fragments of knowledge--
established in 1827,
Canada's oldest museum

has shifted back and forth
across the American border
no less than three times
its present site a warehouse
where corsets once were fashioned

wandering from floor to floor
I move through layers of sound
from the distant past--
the steam-driven sewing machines
which echo the thundering falls

the chatter of the workers
whose hands flutter like sparrows
over metal eyelets and small bits of lace;
later, the whispers of the very first visitors
peering in wonder at the cluttered collections--

musical instruments beside ancient weaponry
Egyptian coins next to Eskimaux artifacts--
as I search in vain for logical connections
you see the importance of the thing itself
lending dignity to the weariest exhibit

to the display of those
who first challenged the falls
battling nature in their awkward contraptions--
the woman nestled in a barrel

with her dog for company

spinning in a whirlpool six long hours
before being pulled out already too late
except for the dog who survived the swirling darkness
having gulped down the air
intended for his owner

to the animals displayed
in troubling narratives--
bison being ambushed
by a raging pack of wolves
a snake coiled tightly round a terrified baboon

even the freaks of nature
gain a certain nobility--
creatures with limbs too great or too few
the lamb whose head twists forever heavenward
the two-headed calf divided in its view

as you peer into these cases
your mind roams beyond the relics
creating lives for the collectors
who gathered such treasures--
the museum owner's son

who travelled twice to Egypt
returning triumphantly
with bits of stone from the pyramids
and mummies unravelling
with Medusa-like locks

a collector named McNabb
who, we are told,
purchased the moccasins
from Sitting Bull's feet
taking also the slippers

of his favourite squaw
though one of the slippers
(another note tells us)
was lost inexplicably
in the depths of Rainy Lake

our final steps upward
bring us to the tower
and a view of the falls
shrouded in mist;
as we gaze at the water

you speak
of the mismatched items
from each display
threading them like beads
into exquisite patterns

which tell of the Victorians
and their yearning
for narrative
the value they placed
on pure acquisition

driving homeward
I am haunted by images
from this strange museum--
the remains of two Indians
found huddled in a cave

birds positioned in patterns of flight
the colour long drained from their exotic wings
the humpbacked whale
whose sun-bleached skeleton
bears the carved initials of visitors long past--

how different are these crude marks
from those you've made on me--
small, delicate imprints
yet still so close
to the bone

Spring

coaxes your mind open
widening its corridors,
allowing thoughts long frozen
to awaken with new vigour

you shed the layers
of a dark, icy winter
with the joy of one
constricted too long

around you now
the world begins to thaw
you watch as life returns
to the silent streets

through lingering slush and snow
children pedal furiously--
bright and glittering
on Christmas present bikes

skipping ropes are turned
phosphorescent colours
rising through the air
with sing-song voices

you want to tell someone
that spring is about
reclaiming the world
taken from your very hands

but now such loss is behind you
for you are here
your world is opening
and you run towards it laughing

Bird Bath

six degrees Celsius
seems a little cool
for swimming
yet there they are
in spring's brown-green garden

three starlings
huddled together
in the murky water
plunging and shaking furiously
looking at each other
as if on a dare
to see who can best endure

as each meets his limits
he wheels off
toward the flat grey sky
leaving the waters still
once more

until the cardinal arrives
to gaze at his reflection
and shudders at the thought
of his own red elegance
bathed by such waters
choosing instead
the soft mist of rain
which has just begun

yet this is a place
I have never been
a place that exists
in a summer only dreamt of,
and sitting content
beneath the tree
is the I
 who I
 wish to be

Close

summer presses down on us
with the weightiness of wool blankets
until finally it is too much
even to wave good-bye

we move slowly through the hours
the heat stealing our breath
anger licking at the edges
of nerves stretched thin

downtown the pavement simmers
horns are blown at the slightest infraction
sunburnt faces stare toward a sky
refusing to open its moist, green arms

as the day wraps me in its smothering embrace
I seek relief in words spoken--
frosted, chilled, icy, frozen
flurries, blizzard, blinding snowstorm

words to treasure like small bits of ice
sliding them mercifully down my red-hot throat
as the world waits
for a cool glass of rain

October Morning

fall-tipped leaves
fast orange and red
sun seeping through
making green seem golden

in the quiet dawn
beneath the stillness of sky
world is early-apple crisp
sharp in the mouth

morning, now,
cut out of night-time coolness
clearer, more certain
than notes first forming

what holds me here
(staring long through the window)
is the promise of absence--
fall's single embrace

Snow Fell

the day I left
and the temperature too
forcing me to wear
layer upon layer
while trying to believe
that somewhere it was warmer

landing in Honolulu at three in the morning
how absurd I felt assembling my bike
while other passengers departed
into a dreamscape
of ghostly orange streetlights
and shadowy palm trees

the world seemed even less real
the next morning
as I cycled out of the city's bright chaos
and began to climb
through black volcanic hills,
tracing the paths of ancient eruptions

reaching Hawaii's northern tip
I placed my tent
beside the blue-green edge
of ocean
and watched as the sun
dropped fire from the sky

in the morning I rode
across pineapple plantations
where the thick sweet air
left me drowsy and dreaming
of snow
falling half a world away

Awty

warm rain in winter
melts
white into grey--
the world's tipped on its side
and with it I
slide
into a place so unfamiliar

suddenly, these are not my hands
this is not my voice--
even the simplest gesture seems foreign
in a world gone awry

April Brings Snow

I once despaired
over rainfall in winter
how it tilted my world
making everything foreign

now April brings snow
and despair grows greener--
winding round my limbs
stopping up my mouth

suddenly this whiteness
has always been and
(doubtful of reports)
will always be

II

where to place the truth
of a rainbow in winter?
snow storms in springtime
muffling the earth?

meaning's stance seems slight
shifting always to fit experience--
first this is spring, then this
then this and this and this

still, I go on naming,
writing the world
again and again
in small, black script

Sweet Spot

I try to explain how it feels
to hit the ball just so--
low to high with perfect topspin
making contact in the racquet's very centre

you deliver a look of incomprehension
so I describe the sensation of the basketball
rolling perfectly off my fingertips,
the clean swoosh of the ball dropping silently through the net

I tell of carving my skis
through fresh fallen snow
while weaving a trail
down the side of the mountain

of rollerblading
along smooth dark pavement,
sweeping back and forth
as the wheels heat up beneath me

finally I speak of that moment on the bike
when stretched out over the bars
my legs spinning with fury
suddenly I am pure motion

glancing at your face
I see my language is foreign
and even my hand gestures
do little to convince you

not wishing to admit defeat,
I switch gears before making a final attempt--
think of the moment, I tell you,
when after hours of struggling to complete a poem

you have left it unfinished and are busy with something else--
washing the dishes, tucking your children into bed--
and suddenly the right word slips into place
pulling the rest of the poem snugly around itself

I watch as a smile
spreads slowly across your face
like arms at the finish line
spreading wide in celebration

Cycling at Dawn

through the finest mist
I saw sheep
weaving trails of silver
across a hillside
glimmering with dew

returning later
to a trampled field
I found sheep standing idle
beneath a glaring sun

Place

I sit writing
in the coolness
of my room
the evening light filtered
through broad leaves
of maple,
air heavy
with the scent
of lilacs

a vase of tulips
stands before me--
a whisper of purple,
a red-orange burst
of flame

here in the silence
I have answered
your question
regarding my vision
of a perfect
place

This I See

"Man is a genius when he is dreaming"

-Akira Kurosawa

she seems to glide
past my window,
a young Oriental woman
cycling
with her daughter
behind her

the sky is the dark green
of afternoon thunderstorms
though the rain has eased
to a gentle drizzle
through which
wonderously
the sun is shining

the little girl releases
a flower
from her hand
then reaches back
laughing
as pink petals
float toward the ground

this I see
in a single frame
and would believe it
a moment
in Kurosawa's *Dreams*
but for the petals
lying still
on darkened pavement

Feline

you request
and accept love
shamelessly
and for that
I much admire you

your lack of discernment
allows you
to go limp in the arms
of complete strangers

after all
your demands are few--
warm hands, a soft voice
and a comfortable lap
to sleep in

watching you
sprawling contentedly
in the lap of another
I see how little
my absence
might mean

and though I appreciate
your gift
for finding love
at every turn
I yearn just a little
for loyalty

At Two

years of age
your world circles about you
immense
and I watch
as you maneuver
your way through
with careful steps

at the park
the fountain requires
steady balance
and still there are tears
as dark drops of water
dampen your favourite sweater

sitting high on my shoulders
as we explore the trails
you are so quiet
I worry
until your sister tells me
(with the assurance of one
as old as four)
that you're fine, you're smiling

later, a treat
of hot chocolate and cookies
demands your full attention
as you raise your drink
slowly toward you
(your whole face disappearing
into your mug)

across the table
your sister masters the art
of talking over tea
and you stare with blue-eyed wonder
at her magic act of balance
while I sit mesmerized
by your delicate gestures
almost aching at the sight
of such small hands

Something in You

that invites the unhinging
of the heart
the opening--however trembling--
into that fragile, sheltered place

you reach in gently
though with a firmness of will
knowing the heart
must bear examination

to the mind tightly bound
you offer release
dissolving its ties
with slowly chanted spells

in the absence of wands
I believe no less in your magic,
in the transformation that occurs
as you conjure a sudden, new world

the sorcery, granted,
is my perception only
still, it may charm you
to know

in the world of another
you have been cast
in the role
of magician

Wed

for Maria and Stu

your wedding day
brings rain--
summer green and warm
falling from grey sky

ladies in blue
we stand round you--
Maid Marion in white
with dark hair flowing

you have dreamt of this moment
since your father first spoke
of castles and kingdoms
in faraway places

now he hovers about
hands in his pockets
as if considering what remains
once he gives you away

at the Chateau Laurier
people pause to watch
talking quietly
of la belle mariee

I lift my dress as I sweep past
for I too am drawn
into your tale--
a lady in waiting speaking demurely

and how startled I am
by my own heart swooning
at sad strains of violin
and vows softly spoken

Moment

sitting beside you
this afternoon
how I wanted
to lean towards
and kiss you--
even to brush my fingertips
lightly across your wrist

I am glad now
that I did not
that instead
the moment remains
suspended in my mind
unencumbered by the real

North

you are on my mind
again
funny thing is
I can't quite remember
when you weren't
or what the world was like
before your name held meaning
when it was merely sound
vibrating in the ear
simply letters
clustered on the page

like a compass
I am drawn
towards your north
and you linger
in my thoughts
like final notes
sounding
yet I cannot place you
into words--
but for your name
which leaves me
trembling

The Garden

for Gram

because you cannot
visit the garden
I wish to bring it to you
though I must tell you
the sun has been absent

and the garden I give
is full of the dark rains
of spring--
the foggy mornings
and grey afternoons
when day fades into night
with little distinction

but for all that
there is beauty
in the redness
of the Japanese maple,
in the purple crocus blossoming
amongst the silver-green
tapestry of vine

beauty too
in the graceful stems
of Spanish bluebells,
and in the first bold daffodils
trumpeting their own return

sitting at the window
I watch an elderly neighbour
consider the garden
then raise her head
and gesture to me--
these are beautiful, she mouths,
pointing to the violets

I nod and smile
for her hands
clasped in joy
remind me so much of you
and just for a moment
you are here
gazing at this mist-filled garden

Gram

born in Wapella, Saskatchewan
in 1905
my grandmother tells
of living through
terrible droughts
and long winters
when the greatest treat
was the sweetness
of an apple

she tells too
of leaving school
at thirteen
to become mother to four
when their own mother died

but what she learned
she never let go
and eighty years later
she can still recite
poems memorized
in a one-room schoolhouse--
*The day is done, and the darkness
Falls from the wings of Night*

long after my gram
moved eastward
in a nurse's uniform,
I visited Wapella
somehow hoping
to see her
galloping past
on her father's horse

instead I found
only tired storefronts
bleached and peeling
in the August heat
and empty buildings
with shattered windows
where luck ran out
long ago

having promised to send a postcard
I sat staring at the picture
of a brightly painted barn
wondering how much to tell her

I considered the grain elevators
lording over the town
and the beautiful creek
running just behind main street

then realizing the postmark
would conjure a place
undisturbed by a changing world
I spoke only
of the hot prairie sun
and of the endless land
that left my eyes
aching

for it was this sun and land
that marked her beginning
that lay deep in memory
like the touch
of her mother's hand

Childhood Stories

I laugh as I tell these stories
for perhaps the hundredth time
then suddenly
there I am
staring at myself as a child

I want to weep for this girl
who tumbles gracelessly
from the monkey bars
who plays the pugilist
and will not follow the rules

I want to lift her up
in my arms
and twirl her into
a bright blur
 of laughter

and I want
more than anything
to have her carry this laughter--
a talisman clutched tightly
in her own small fist

An Apology

for Brian

I'm sorry I couldn't see
that taking your money
meant something other
than buying candy at the store
that you were left feeling betrayed
again and again
by a sister you barely knew

it was only ever currency
for what I desired--
the fiery spice of cinnamon hearts
burning the edges of my tongue
the pale pink candy bracelets
cutting deep into my wrist

and whether it helps at all
to hear this truth
(that there was no malice
you were absent from the act)
I cannot say
but will tell you instead

of the moment
some years later
when mother told me
how hurt you'd been
by me
and I felt for the first time
the hot flush of shame
the sharpness of sorrow
for losses I could not repay

Tied

for Sarah

after
sharing a room with you for years,
singing you to sleep
with ragged bits of song

all the sorry schemes
I dragged you into,
dividing the blame
whenever we were caught

endless hours of play
in makeshift tents--
our own secret world
beneath the darkness of blankets

the summer trips to Nova Scotia
in the back of the Volvo,
watching lines and poles
go looping past

how far apart we grew--
the ties between us stretched so thin
they vanished
in the clutter of our lives

only now do we move
in a similar orbit
circling, once more,
the same bright sun

again I am drawn
by the sound of your voice,
feeling the pull
through the length of the wire

as our words weave together
like the tight braids of rug
we once wrapped round us
forming small, blue cocoons

Small Details

having written the word
mother
I falter
since who you are
is woven so intricately

into my own tapestry
it seems impossible
to examine you
without unraveling
the threads of myself

like a painting
viewed closely
you become
all colour
and small details

bright orange
duck boots
covered in dirt
from hours spent
perfecting your garden

Marks and Spencers
corduroys
in an array of earthy tones
sturdy and comfortable
for your hikes with the ladies

your flesh-coloured
knee brace
a reminder
of the car accident
long before I was born

which left
a scar
so close to your temple
you will never forget
how death brushed past

there are details too
which speak
of other worlds ventured--
the elegant jewelry
of your travels

the silver rings
from the Blue men
of Mauritania
the delicate gold earrings
transported from Crete

as a traveler
you carry one small bag
and a knowledge of the country
gathered from books
during the long, cold winters

your travel journals
are concise,
information-bound
like the postcards written
in your small, neat script

from Spain you send a picture
of a tall, majestic woman
draped in black and gold,
her arms arching gracefully
as she plays the castanets

I read your message
searching for you
just as I gaze
at the photographs
of you as a child

wondering
about the little girl
whose hair
is tightly woven
in beautiful french braids

I recall, finally,
a memory of long ago
one hot afternoon
at the cottage
when you disappeared

and we searched everywhere
finding you reading
in the back of the car--
I realized then
you existed

apart from us
with your own world
to contemplate
to nurture
and explore

Regarding My Father

he is taking a trip
(six weeks in Greece)
and will be on foot
as much as possible

the hills of Guelph
have become his training ground,
striding towards the church
perched high above the city

he climbs dreaming
of weightlessness
but for the necessities
filling his pack--

a Goretex rainsuit (on average
rain falls from the skies
seven to nine days
in the cruelest month)

a flashlight
(top of the line
Mountain Equipment
which will illuminate

entire monastic frescoes
yet weighs less
than the rain
that will sit upon his brow)

extra layers
to shield against the cold
as Athens' sun drops
out of the sky--

the pack has been trimmed
down
to nineteen pounds
my father reports victoriously

lifting it with ease
from the bathroom scales,
he too has become
a project for reduction

with his hair shaved
to military length
leaving him, at turns,
boyish and severe

before he leaves
he shows me
his black book
containing not names of women

he has known and loved
but the Greece
he has read
and recorded note by note

he guides me through the world
he is about to explore
and turning
to the final page

reveals in triumph
his lengthy index--
itself a poem
of carefully measured lines

in his first call home,
with words that hesitate
in the spaces of the wire,
he tells us he has fallen

while hiking to a ruin--
Icarus brought earthward
the swelling of his knee
revealing his weightiness

yet he has remained
on schedule
hiking the whole day
on fragile limb

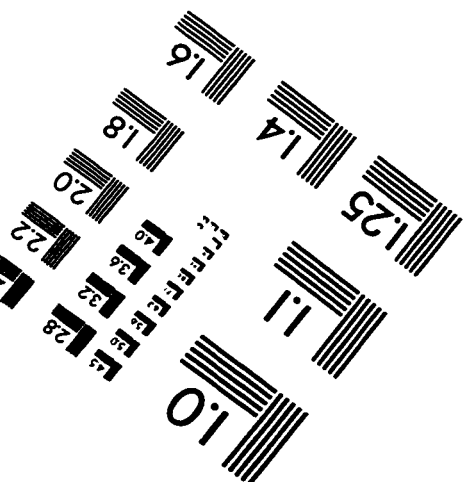
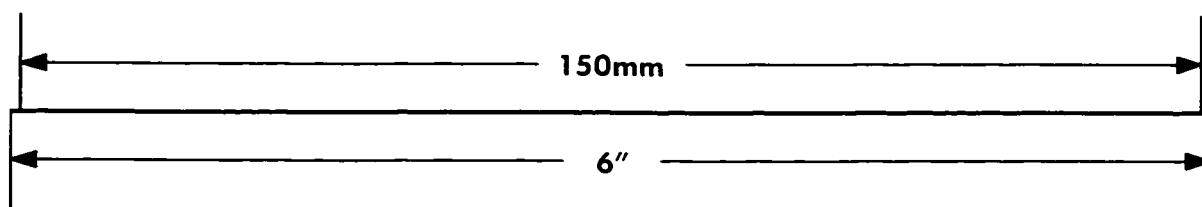
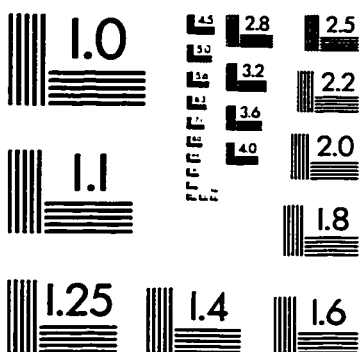
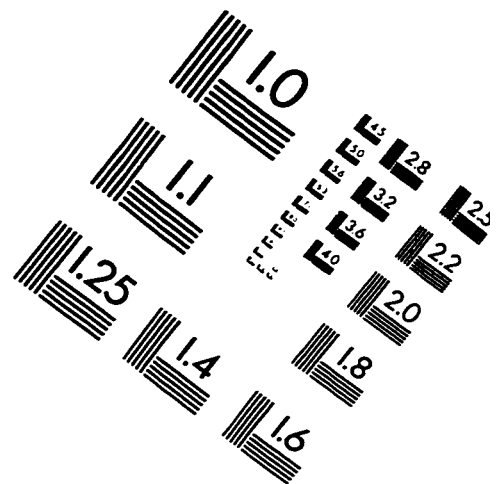
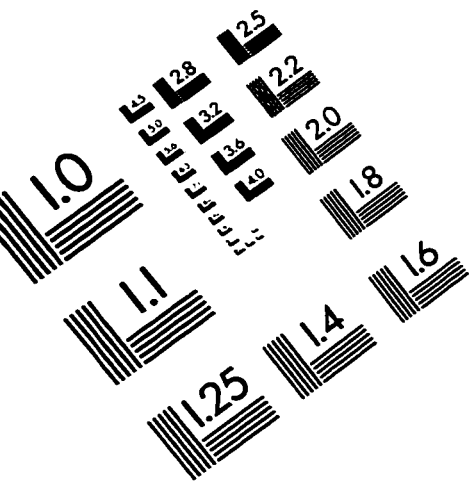
denying the ground
beneath his feet
the ache of his pack
between the sharpened blades of shoulder--

a wingless figure
carved away to self
guided by hieroglyphics
of his own design

Vita Auctoris

Robin Todd was born in Kitchener, Ontario in 1964. She obtained her Honours B.A. in English from the University of Western Ontario in 1988, followed by her M.A. in Literature from Dalhousie University in 1989, and her B.Ed. from the University of Ottawa in 1991. After teaching English at Lakefield College School for for four years, she took a year's leave to complete her M.A. in Creative Writing at the University of Windsor. She has returned to Lakefield's English Department where she has added Creative Writing to her teaching duties.

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